

STRAIGHT TALK

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BARRETT RAINEY: The name Robert Burford is one that most Idahoans weren't well acquainted with until about 9 months ago. At that time acting in his capacity as National Director of the Bureau of Land Management, he ordered former Idaho BLM Director, Robert Buffington, to Washington and to a new job. When Buffington refused and called the whole thing a political transfer, Robert Burford became a name more familiar to Idahoans. Burford demonstrated a steadfastness and low keyed determination in that series of events, and in a conversation I had with him within the last few days, those qualities became apparent again. Burford is one of those political appointees that looks as though he would be much more at home without the standard coat and tie, and much more comfortable in boots and jeans. His response to questions sound at first sort of "down home," but as you listen, you begin to hear a direction and a purposefulness in his answers. Our conversation ranged into a number of controversial areas such as his sympathy with the Sagebrush Rebellion, his personal view of what he sees as possible contradictions in wilderness designations, and his strongly stated feelings that Washington, D.C. "is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there." We started with his own description of the personal business and political progress that led him to Washington.

BURFORD: I started out in a ranching family, third generation ranch family in western Colorado. I won a scholarship to Colorado School of Mines because I was interested in engineering and graduated from there, and took a couple years out for a government-sponsored tour of the Pacific region in China, courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps. Came back and ranched for a while, then went to work for Permenium Aluminum Company for a year and a half in Jamaica and California and decided that company politics was not for me, and went back to the ranching

business where you're your own boss. I've essentially been my own boss until I took this job in the government. I now have a couple or three other bosses, if you exclude Congress, but I'm enjoying my position. It is interesting, challenging, sometimes frustrating, and I'm sometimes asked the question as to how I like the job and I say, "It's according to what day it is." But actually, after you get over the frustrations and balance them all off, it's a good job and it's an opportunity for - I consider it an opportunity for me to be of service to the United States and be of service in trying to express a philosophy in public land management.

RAINEY: You have a few years in politics - not a lot, but a few - but you've got a lot of years in the ranching business and living in Colorado, dealing with the land. How do you find yourself in your job looking at things? Do you look more from the user standpoint? Do you think you look more from the political standpoint? How does a job, what does it draw from you?

BURFORD: Well, I suppose every individual's made up of an accumulation of his past experiences, and some people probably look at me as if I were strictly development-oriented. I think if they could go back and look at the land that I've managed personally - not only the land that I owned myself, but the government land that I was interested in - they'd find that I've been a conservationist all my life. I've been interested in wildlife, have stocks above timberline lakes that never had fish in them before, and I've helped in management of game herds. I've sometimes argued with Game and Fish Department about their management (RAINEY:
? Bought yourself the other side of the fence, huh?), but I have been interested in land conservation, land use, natural resources, and both a protection attitude and development attitude throughout my entire career.

RAINEY: A few months ago, your Idaho Director, Clair Whitlock, told me that in

a strict sense of the word, he felt he could be called a conservationist. He was interested in the outdoors, as a hiker and a skier. His predecessor certainly was. You term yourself a conservationist, both before you got into the job and in this job. Is it, does it sometimes give you a pain in the backside when somebody who calls himself an environmentalist looks at you and calls you a bureaucrat?-- as opposed to someone who has your background.

BURFORD: Well, I suppose both Clair and I are going to have to admit that we are bureaucrats. I guess I'm a nonprofessional bureaucrat, but at least I am a bureaucrat temporarily.

RAINEY: Oh, we could play with that one for a long time.

1-★ BURFORD: It's - oh, I think maybe you get down into a basic interpretation of the word conservationist, and to conserve means put to wise use. I look at things and I recognize that some of those wise uses may be preservations such as the wilderness people advocate. In certain instances, that is probably the wisest use of that particular area. But there are other places where wise use, as far as a nation of 230 million people are concerned, certainly means highest productive use and means development with good reclamation after mining or gas development, or after right-of-ways pass through. There is room for everything, but I am not a preservationist. I don't think that you can maintain the status quo as far as land use is concerned any more than you can maintain the status quo as far as population is concerned. I think if our problems, most of them in land, are caused by people ... If it had been - I've often said in Colorado where I served in the legislature for 6 years that if the Navajos and the Utes had had a good anti-immigration policy, Colorado wouldn't have had any problems. But those problems are there, and they have to be addressed. Sometimes it's a tough decision to make between competing interests, but somebody has to make that decision.

RAINEY: Like it or not, you live in a political sphere and you also now, at least for the term of your employment back there, live in a community that is not sometimes in touch with what's going on in the rest of the world. Which decisions do you find yourself most often faced with: pragmatic business decisions or political considerations?

BURFORD: I think my attitude towards approaching a problem is that the first thing I do is look at - you might term it pragmatic - business-like approach to it and then after you make a selection of that option, then you certainly have to take into account the political considerations. In Washington, you do live in a political world, and it's a world that even someone who is fairly well versed in politics as I certainly was - although I started into elective politics fairly late in life - I did get a lot of experience in a hurry. But Washington, it's a different ball game back there, and you find that out in a hurry. You've got a very hostile press, and that hostility extends to almost all politicians, of either party, and it has certainly extended to the Reagan Administration. You live in that environment, and you have to adapt to it. You don't necessarily like it, but you recognize that your decisions have to be made. I think first and foremost, I'd like to at least think that I put the good of the country first and then try to make this organization run.

3. { RAINEY: Do you ever find yourself in a position where you knew you were going down the right road, but then for political reasons you got jerked around?

BURFORD: I don't think that that's ever really happened to me, getting jerked around. I may have been bent a little bit, may have altered a decision a little bit for political consideration. But in general, Jim Watt is a man that you know is very contentious and he does not make a lot of decisions with political viewpoint in mind, or he wouldn't be in as much trouble as he manages to get in every

so often. Jim Watt, and I think that I did too, took Ronald Reagan very seriously when he first told all of us that went back there with the Administration that we were to run the government as if we were a one-term institution and that we were not to let political considerations override the decisions that should be made for the good of America as we saw it.

RAINEY: Let's talk about some areas of interest to the West. The inventory that your agency is conducting on the sale of public lands, what lands will be sold and where and all of that. When are you going to fully publicize all of that inventory that you are considering for sale?

BURFORD: Well, the asset management program as we in Interior term it, those first figures of about 2,700,000 acres are lands which through the planning process, which has been going on in the Bureau since early 60's, are lands that have been identified through the planning process as being surplus and available for exchange or sale. They've already been through public participation in the land use planning process. All we did was gather those acreages up and put them on a list, list them all at one time, which is something that I don't think has ever been done. We also asked State Directors and District Managers to identify lands next to centers of population or identify lands that could possibly pass into agricultural use and that might be available under an amendment to the present land use plan. There's certain areas that have not been planned yet, and there those areas have to be studied and go through the planning process before anything in them would be available for sale under FLPMA. The public, and especially the public in Idaho, has been stirred up a lot over this issue. There's been nothing secret about it. I think we could have done a better job of publicizing some of those lists earlier on as to exactly how they arrived at and where those lands are.

RAINEY: Are those lists available now? To the public?

BURFORD: They're available in the District Offices. Every District Office's plan and area has the land use plan in it, and they're available in that land use plan. We're looking at the idea of maybe putting a dot on a map where one of those areas occurs.

RAINEY: But, if you went to a BLM State Office ...

BURFORD: They're not available. I suppose maybe -- is a copy of that available in the State Office? - I think they are available in a State Office. They're certainly available in the District Offices. If the local people want to go in and look at that land use plan, they can see the lands that are identified as surplus lands.

RAINEY: So those who say you're still keeping it secret really have access to the lists already.

BURFORD: Yes, the lists are there. They don't have to file a Freedom of Information request to get it. It's public property and has been ever since the land use plan was completed.

RAINEY: So then, it would be your estimate that you're talking, available for sale, about 2,700,000 acres.

BURFORD: Throughout the 48 states. Alaska's excluded.

RAINEY: All of which might not be sold.

BURFORD: No, all of which might not be sold. We've also asked for the District Managers and Area Managers to identify lands which are adjacent to centers of populations for which, where there might be demand for land for community expansion and these are, we have made lands like this available in the past. A lot of them available to the communities in Nevada, for instance, because there's so little

private?

public land in the state of Nevada and there's so many communities there that are landlocked by public lands. They can't expand and that creates an artificial high market for real estate, because there isn't any real estate available outside the city limits.

RAINEY: Well, that's kind of my next question. Under land under your care, would local levels of government have a crack at it?

BURFORD: The local levels of government were asked by the Secretary... That's one of the first things that Secretary Watt did was call the governors in and ask them to identify public lands in their state and ask the communities in the individual states to identify public domain lands that they would like to have for parks or public purposes, hospitals, recreation sites, and that list came in. We've been working on those transfers under the R&PP.

RAINEY: A lot of people think that if land is sold to private ownership that there will be no access, that fences will go up and "No Trespassing" signs and that will be that. Can this land be sold or should it be sold with, in some cases, public access provided for in the sale as a condition of sale?

BURFORD: Sure, and if there is an access problem and if a piece of land ... I used the example this morning that, let's say we had a 160 that want to cross a wild and scenic river, controlled access to that river for people ... It either should not be sold or it should be sold with the right-of-way maintained to get to the stream or to the point of interest, whatever it is.

RAINEY: So you don't see public lands sales as locking up the West?

BURFORD: No. I do not. Most of these pieces of land we're talking about, a lot of them, are inaccessible to the public at the present time. They're surrounded by private lands that you can't get through, or they're part of a ranch and a small

enough part of it that they're not really good hunting. I think it's a chance to improve the management patterned land in the West, and we have a lot of isolated tracts that in essence we can't manage.

4 { RAINEY: Is the Administration accomplishing through its planned sale of land something that the Sagebrush Rebellion couldn't have done?

BURFORD: First thing, if you remember, the specified intent of the Sagebrush Rebellion was to turn the public lands over to state control. This - the Property Review Board and the mandate the President gave them is to take the surpluses and put them into the private sector, so there is an essential difference in their ultimate goal of the Sagebrush Rebellion and of the Presidential Order 12348. I don't know that it's -- no, I don't think it's going to accomplish the goal of the Sagebrush Rebellion, which was state control.

RAINEY: If you were a farmer or a rancher, purely again, would you be a member of the Sagebrush Rebellion or not?

BURFORD: Yeah, I think I would. I looked upon ... You know, I'm 58 years old and I've been through this sale of public lands a couple of times in my lifetime. Probably the first time back in the early 40's -- no late 40's maybe, 46 or 48. Somewhere around there, there was a big movement on to sell the public lands and it didn't go then. I looked on the Sagebrush Rebellion as a way of getting the attention of the Federal government that they were being very harsh and domineering in their administration of lands within western states, and as a means of getting the attention of Washington and of the East and focusing it on the problems of the public land states.

RAINEY: Squeaky wheel gets the grease.

BURFORD: Yeah, and I think that it has achieved at least a part of that goal,

and I've told some of the members of the Sagebrush Rebellion that I don't think they should disband because they HAVE gotten the attention of Washington. I think it's something that they should keep Washington's attention.

RAINEY: Do you consider yourself sort of a friend at court for the user?

BURFORD: Well, I think I may be viewed that way. I don't, I don't know. That's a difficult question to answer because I suppose I do have a bias towards the user of the public lands, but ...

RAINEY: Is it a bias, or is it just more of a better knowledge of their argument?

BURFORD: I guess I -- maybe it's a little of each, but I -- I also have, having grown up I spent a lot of my life alone, especially in my early years, and I have a great appreciation of solitude and I've been in solitude in a lot of places that I would not like to see despoiled. And sometimes I think that maybe that may be where I get in some arguments with the Wilderness Society is because sometimes I think designating an area a wilderness area runs up a flag and tells everybody in the United States "come look at me," and destroys ... But then, man has been noted for destroying what he seeks. I think sometimes that we do areas a disservice by designation, and that's strange. The wilderness people will argue with me, but I think that I looked at this Big and Little Jack's Creek area out here and I told the wilderness man out there, I said, "You designate this and you're going to have all kinds of people coming in there" and his answer is "Well, we'll restrict access." And I don't know if you -- that's a pretty tough situation. You're going to say that we set this piece of property out here that belongs to all the people of the United States and then we're going to tell them that nobody or only a select few can go in there? There's a point of argument there, and it's a tough problem.

RAINEY: National BLM Director, Robert Burford, talking about what he terms a tough problem. But he's a man who knew there would be such problems when he took office and when you talk to him, he seems to communicate a willingness to deal with them. I'm Barrett Rainey, KBOI News.

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